

SAFER OR SORRIER?

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The Contemporary American Comic Epic: The Novels of Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey. By Elaine B. Safer. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988. 216 pp. \$29.95.

Elaine B. Safer's The Contemporary American Comic Epic considers six novels by four authors: Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor and Giles Goat-Boy, Pynchon's V. and Gravity's Rainbow, Gaddis's The Recognitions, and Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion. Safer's purpose is to understand in what ways and toward what ends these novels are both comic and epic. This would seem to be a harmless enough undertaking, although some readers may find themselves exasperated by the author's unself-conscious return to a simpler critical world undisturbed by the implications of structuralist and poststructuralist thought, a world in which the critic's primary business is charting allusions, making genre distinctions, and offering propaedeutic thematic analyses. Safer may nod in passing to the work of, say, Umberto Eco or (in a note) Hayden White, and she may speak of intertextuality or label her subjects "postmodern" (which she does without further comment, as though the term were self-explanatory and unproblematic), but for her Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey remain essentially what they once were judged to be: existentialists, black humorists, absurdist fabulators. Consequently, the appropriate approach to Barth et al. is still yesterday's, with each novelist seen as exploiting black humor and ironic allusiveness (that is, allusiveness which "mocks the present and is often ambivalent about the past" [21]) in the service of an absurdist vision that incorporates the techniques of traditional comic prose epics and makes parodic use of the conventions and intentions of the traditional epic to yield existential satire. As Safer writes in her conclusion,

These postmodern works have their roots in the traditional epic and also are linked to the comic tradition of Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes's Don Quixote, and Fielding's Joseph Andrews. They, like Joseph Andrews, are comic epics in prose. They, too, expose the pervading attitudes of vanity, hypocrisy, and concern with worldly pursuits. However, while Joseph Andrews attacks follies and vices by contrasting them with the ideal values of charity and good-heartedness, the twentieth-century comic epics mock all ideals, emphasizing man's foolishness in seeking them. All these postmodern epic novels are encyclopedic in scope, focus on the ironic quest of the hero of the absurd, and use exaggeration to satirize all institutions. Highly allusive and full of farce, satire, and the grotesque-

comic aspects of black humor, these contemporary comic works are philosophically grounded in existentialism and the absurd. (157)

Thus, "contemporary epics indicate a disappointed desire for order in an irrational twentieth-century world. They emphasize a culture that seems to have lost confidence in norms and in heroic subjects, a culture of people whose quests are--in the end--absurd. These mock epics suggest a decline in revered values within a twentieth-century community devoid of heroic meaning" (159). What saves these novels from bleak nihilism, what gives each its affirmative underpinning, is not only its humor but the order imposed by carefully controlled allusiveness and the revamping of traditional epic conventions: "the highly ordered comic epic novels show that man is capable of creating imagined worlds that transform despair over lost ideals into newfound comedy" (160). This affirmation is arrived at by readers' negotiating the novels through a "tripartite process: first, realization of the exposure of false ordering systems; second, the readers' disorientation when they cannot find meaning; and, finally, the comic awakening to and acceptance of the sheer absurdity of the human predicament, the acceptance of the Camusian exhortation to laugh with scorn at the absurd quest and try our best to meet disappointment with humor and strength" (24).

Such remarks have been unexceptionable truisms of American novel criticism for decades. Perhaps Safer cannot be faulted overmuch for having chosen this particular route to comprehension rather than one a bit less threadbare, a bit more innovative. Still, I wonder: do we really need 161 pages of text, 31 pages of notes, and a 16-page bibliography to support the contention that Gravity's Rainbow and Giles Goat-Boy are comic? Or that they are epic in scale and ambition? Or that they employ black humor and allusiveness to drive home their points (if we grant point-making to be part of the postmodern agenda)?

Safer can hardly be criticized for her selection of texts. The books she has chosen certainly support her contentions and are indeed important contemporary American novels. Yet one might ask why JR is ignored; Safer offers no reasons for this exclusion. Nor does she explain why she elected not to include Coover, whose Public Burning in many respects suits Safer's intentions better than Sometimes a Great Notion. (Catch-22, which might also come to mind, is dismissed with the observation that it is simply "not epic" [20].) One might raise similar questions regarding those touchstone texts--traditional epics, comic prose epics--seen as important sources for Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey: why Magnalia Christi Americana but not U.S.A.? Why Don Quixote but not Modern Chivalry? But as I say, it would be unfair to fault Safer for choosing not to discuss certain works. So let us instead consider in some detail what Safer has done.

Following an overview of her project which defines terms and introduces the ideas she intends to develop, Safer offers two chapters--one on Mather's epic, one on Leaves of Grass--that are meant to identify the epic conventions (catalogs, typological associations, historical sweep, allusiveness, the articulation of national/communal values) and characteristic American themes (America as the new Eden, the American as Adam, the translatio motif, and so on) that inform, albeit ironically, the contemporary American comic epic. Thus, for instance, Magnalia Christi Americana is important, Safer contends, "for three major reasons":

It is an early example of a highly allusive American epic in prose, a form to which the twentieth-century epic novels develop an ironic counterpart. It contains themes that recur in American literature and are mocked in the contemporary American comic epic novel: the concept of America as a new Garden of Eden; America as a new Canaan; and America as the high point of the westward advancement of culture, the arts, and empire. It utilizes genres (in addition to the epic) that are parodied in the twentieth-century novel: the history or chronicle; saints' lives; and the jeremiad sermon, which encourages men to repent their evil and preaches God's forgiveness. (25)

Throughout these two background chapters, interesting topics surface: the metamorphosis of the jeremiad from Mather's use of it to Pynchon's; or, in the Leaves of Grass chapter, the transformation of Adamic man into "alienated man." Yet here as throughout, Safer sells her insights short by abbreviating her discussions, leaving them underdeveloped and consequently lame. Here, for example, is her initial treatment of the contemporary jeremiad almost in toto (at the ellipsis I have deleted a quotation from the end of Gravity's Rainbow):

Mather uses the jeremiad form to affirm his belief in the covenant between God and the Puritans, his faith in redemption, and the importance of New England's mission in history. The contemporary prose epic Gravity's Rainbow, on the other hand, uses the jeremiad form to convey lamentation but not a hope for salvation. A hymn of lamentation is recalled at the close of the novel, just as the rocket lands on the roof of the theater. . . . Pynchon's novel presents a world in which there is no covenant between man and God, no hope of redemption. The only way of lessening the torment is through the laughter of black humor. (30)

Although Safer returns to the jeremiad in her chapter on Pynchon, she does not do much more with the idea. Similarly, when she speaks of the transformation of Adamic man into alienated man, she fails to discuss the latter concept (as

though its meaning and implications were obvious), reverting to remarks about the contemporary hero as "naïve bumbler" and "schlimmazel" (43), and leaving the reader to puzzle out whether these are indeed synonymous with "alienated man."

Each of the chapters devoted to individual authors is organized around the particularities of the novels discussed. The Sot-Weed Factor is read primarily as a parody of "traditional frames of reference" such as "the historic John Smith-Pocahontas story; the American Adam; the Socratic dialogue; traditional romance that contains conventions of chastity and love at first sight; and Aristophanes' famous explanation of love as a desire for one's other half" (56). The explication of Giles Goat-Boy, while still governed by the notion of "parodic allusiveness" (69), zeroes in on the quest motif (with special attention to Barth's burlesque renovation of the Christian hero) before turning, rather unsuccessfully, to a consideration of "one of the novel's basic metaphors": the "universe as a university" (73). This digressive turn culminates in a discussion of "Emersonian Traditions of Education" and the following non sequitur paragraph, which closes the chapter:

Even though Barth satirizes academia, he gains his primary readership from university faculty and students. He himself puzzles over this: "Do you know what I think is interesting. . . . It's the spectacle of these enormous universities we have now, all over the place, teaching courses in us. . . . Now that means that a born loser like The Sot-Weed Factor might even be gotten away with, because 2,000 kids in northeast Nebraska or somewhere have to read it in a Modern Novel course. Alarming . . . God knows what we're up to." (78)

By any standards, this isn't much of a conclusion; within the context of Safer's larger discussion, the point of this paragraph escapes me.

The Pynchon chapter finds, in contrast to Barth, "a darker and more caustic vein" of humor brought to bear upon "man's quest for meaning in an absurd world" (79). Safer covers much ground here, though with too great brevity, reducing complex issues to banal simplifications that, Safer implies, require little elaboration. She covers the topic of "Puritan Themes," for example, in a section two-thirds of a page long, and the topic of "The Sacred and the Profane" in a section little more than a page long. (Actually, she returns to these topics at various places throughout the chapter; focus and organization, despite an abundance of subsegmenting, are not among the book's strengths.) The reader familiar with Pynchon and his critics will find few surprises here: Benny and Stencil are absurd heroes; the Whole Sick Crew receive a two-paragraph section, the point of which is that Esther, McClintic, and the rest help

establish the novel's absurdity through "[d]eflation of the spiritual to the profane" (90); entropy and Pynchon's related notion of the "dream of annihilation" receive the usual comments; and Safer explains the topic of "V. and Twentieth-Century Society" in less than a page. Safer's 15 pages on Gravity's Rainbow focus on Pynchon's adaptations of the American tall-tale tradition, the jeremiad, comic-strip characters, quest motifs, and Paradise Lost (the point of this last: Pynchon's "vision of hell invites comparison with famous traditional descriptions, such as that in Paradise Lost, which continually presents hell in relation to heaven"[102]).

In her discussion of The Recognitions, viewed as a satire on contemporary society's materialism and allegiance to false values, Safer doggedly focuses on ironic allusiveness--the novel's references to transcendental themes, Flemish art, the third-century Clementine Recognitions, alchemy, and Goethe's Faust--to reach a by-now-familiar conclusion: "The Recognitions presents a world in which the artist Wyatt continually searches for meaning, a glimpse of a lost paradise, a sign that God is watching. Instead he finds only randomness. . . . It is a book about the ironic desire to soar in atonement in a world in which God is not watching, a world in which God may never have been watching. . . . Gaddis use[s] jest to spend his rage, as he recognizes the absurdist vision that emerges from the contrast between the ideal and its loss" (136-7). Sometimes a Great Notion is seen as centering, more than the other novels discussed, "on traditional heroic subjects: the conflict between two brothers, the Oedipal bind, and the reaction to the death of a loved one" (138). Yet here again the principal lesson is that black humor and "an absurdist vision" (138) inform the tragicomic, alienated quest that is the story of the Stamper clan.

I have truncated these last two chapter summaries because Safer's approach has been established. Moreover, although each chapter does target specific concerns with each novel, more generally, as I have suggested, the book repeatedly rehearses the same salient characteristics of the contemporary comic epic: black humor, ironic allusiveness, absurdist questing, comic deflation in a world of existential randomness, etcetera. And repeatedly, it reaches the same conclusions: "This black humor novel [Giles Goat-Boy] shows the inversion of traditional comedy when disorder, not order, emerges at the end of the quest" (73); "Black humorist Pynchon laughs at man's helplessness in an alien universe and in a social network that has grown way beyond his control, and he wants the readers also to laugh" (108); "Gaddis's second major inversion of the allusive mode to develop absurdist comedy is based on medieval alchemy" (124); Kesey "ironically makes the reader aware of the frailty of [his] characters in an alien universe" (138).

In addition to those problems with The Contemporary American Comic Epic already mentioned, one might briefly mention

that the index is an embarrassment (there is, for instance, no entry for "existentialism"), that Safer relies excessively on secondary sources (often letting a snippet of someone else's work do her job for her), and that although the documentation is perhaps admirably thorough, it too is certainly excessive and frequently unnecessary (and, often, Safer presents citations without introducing them, forcing the reader to rummage through the endnotes to learn who said what where).

More significantly, the idea of "epic" tends repeatedly to fade from view, although this does not finally matter much because what Safer has to say about these novels is dependent less on their being epics than on their being black, absurdist comedies in the allusive mode. Again, whereas the book returns obsessively to certain ideas, it slights others in need of closer attention and more careful articulation than they receive, and this problem, combined with Safer's desire to cover too much ground too quickly, yields a book filled with redundancies; focus and organization problems; digressions (consider, for instance, the sections "John Barth, the University, and the Absurd" and, from the Pynchon chapter, "The Comic Strip and Black Humor"); and glib because unsupported assertions like the following: "In the American comic epic novels, references to religion also generate laughter. But the novels lack the intrinsic religious character that exists in Ulysses, a pattern that is naturally part of the intellectual outlook of Irish Catholics and is commonly absent in the twentieth-century American world" (19-20). When such generalizations are not outrageous, they often (as mentioned above) have the effect of implying that complex ideas are in fact simple to the point of being self-evident, or else they merely result in rather lame material, as these brief excursions into affective criticism reveal: "Readers [of Giles Goat-Boy], aware of traditional quest literature, enjoy the incongruity between expectations and their reversals and they take pleasure in the black humor of the absurd" (72); "As the characters in Gravity's Rainbow quest for answers . . . readers . . . hope for a movement that will culminate in successful action. That they do not achieve this sense of an ending disappoints readers, but the imaginative process gives them a kind of pleasure in appreciating how they have been tricked" (106).

All of which is not to say The Contemporary American Comic Epic lacks merit. The prose is eminently readable, clear and accessible, and because Safer touches upon so many concerns basic to an understanding not only of the six novels she discusses but of contemporary American fiction generally, her study should provide anyone desiring it a useful introduction both to the often puzzling worlds of Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey and to certain main currents in recent fiction. Another way of saying this is that I think Safer's book offers a very teachable approach to these novels, and this is no small feat. Moreover, the book contains a number of provocative ideas: that Kesey is primarily a caricaturist (an idea I would enjoy seeing

Safer elaborate); that in Pynchon's novels the tallest tales turn out to be the true ones. Finally, as Steve Moore remarks in his review of this book (Review of Contemporary Fiction 9.1), one ought to thank Safer for reminding us "that some of the most important novels in contemporary American literature are also some of the funniest."

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